

Emotional Abuse: Identification and Intervention

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“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” Frederick Douglass

Definition of Emotional Abuse

*repeated pattern of damaging interactions between parent and child that becomes typical of the relationship

Wisconsin Statutes (Chapter 48)

Emotional damage means harm to a child's psychological or intellectual functioning evidenced by one or more of the following characteristics exhibited to a severe degree:

- anxiety;
- depression;
- withdrawal;
- outward aggressive behavior; or
- substantial and observable change in behavior, emotional response or cognition that is not within the normal range for the child's age and stage of development.

What is emotional abuse?

1. Terrorizing – making child feel physically or psychologically unsafe
2. Verbally assaulting – name calling, harsh threats, sarcastic comments, telling child s/he is worthless
3. Exploiting or Corrupting – modeling, permitting, or encouraging antisocial or developmentally inappropriate behavior
4. Ignoring/Denying Emotional Responsiveness – failing to express affection, caring, love for child
5. Isolating – cutting child off from normal social experiences with peers, family
6. Rejecting –refusing to acknowledge child's worth and needs
7. Overpressuring – imposing consistent pressure to grow up fast and achieve too early
8. Neglecting mental health, medical health, emotional needs – ignoring, preventing, or failing to provide treatment or services for emotional, behavioral, physical or educational needs or problems
9. Witnessing domestic violence

Possible effects of emotional abuse

Infants – failure to thrive

Feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, shame, insecurity

Withdrawal

Difficulty forming relationships

Poor physical development, basic skills development

Difficulty concentrating in school

Destructive behaviors

Angry acts (fire setting, animal cruelty)

Bullying behavior toward others

Self-abusive behaviors (drug & alcohol abuse, cutting)

Suicidal actions

Gambling, prostitution, running away

Effects that go into adulthood:

Lack of self-worth often leads to entering abusive relationships

May be hostile and angry

Difficulty holding a job

May perpetuate violence they experienced onto their own children

What can we do?

*Raise public awareness of emotional abuse and effects on children

*Educate mandated reporters about emotional abuse

*Be aware of interaction patterns between parent and child as well as child characteristics that may indicate emotional abuse

*Recognize signs of possible emotional abuse in families with whom we work and provide education and support

*Help caregivers develop empathy relative to their children

*Promote policy changes

*Other ideas???

Resources on Emotional Abuse of Children

Arehart-Treichel, J. (July 2006). Parents' verbal abuse leaves long-term legacy. Psychiatric News, 41(13), p 28.

Hamarman, S. & Bernet, W. (July 2000). Evaluating and reporting emotional abuse in children: Parent-based, action-based focus aids in clinical decision-making. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 39(7), pp 928-930.

Kairys, S.W., Johnson, C.F. & Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect. (April 2002). The psychological maltreatment of children-Technical report. Pediatrics, 109(4). (Also found on <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/109/4/e68>)

Nelms, B.C. (May 2001). Emotional abuse: Helping prevent the problem. Journal of Pediatric Health Care, 15(3), pp 103-104.

Teicher, M.H., Samson, J.A., Polcari, A., & McGreenery, C. (June 2006). Sticks, stones, and hurtful words: Relative effects of various forms of childhood maltreatment. American Journal of Psychiatry, 163(6), pp 993-1000.

Websites:

Children's Bureau Express – <http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov> – search on Emotional Abuse

Child Welfare Information Gateway – <http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/types/emotionalabuse>